

ST. ERMON
M. W. R. M.



St. Ermon

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THE

Almost CHRISTIAN:

A
S E R M O N

Preached at the
PARISH CHURCH
OF
Saint JOHN Wapping, &c.

By GEORGE WHITEFIELD, A. B.
of PEMBROKE College, Oxford.

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L O N D O N :

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MDCCXXXVIII.

ACTS xxvi. 28.

*Almost thou persuadest me to be
a Christian.*

THESE Words contain the ingenuous
Confession of King *Agrippa*; which
having some reference to what went
before, it may not be improper to relate to
You the Substance of the preceding Verses,
to which these Words are so closely con-
nected.

THE Chapter then, out of which the Text
is taken, contains an admirable Account the
Great Saint *Paul* gave of his wonderful Con-
version from *Judaism* to *Christianity*, when
he was called to make his Defense before *Festus*
and another *Gentile* Governor. Our Blessed
Lord had long since foretold, that, *When the
Son of Man should be lifted up, his Disciples*
B *should*

should be brought before Kings, for his Name's sake, for a Testimony unto them. And very good was the Design of Infinite Wisdom in thus ordaining it: For Christianity being from the very Beginning a Doctrine of the Cross, the Princes and Rulers of the Earth thought themselves too high to be instructed by such mean Teachers, or too happy to be disturbed by such unwelcome Truths; and therefore would have always continued Strangers to *JESUS CHRIST and him Crucified*, had not the Apostles, by being arraigned as Criminals before them, gained Opportunities of Preaching to them *JESUS and the Resurrection*. Saint Paul knew full well that this was the main Reason, why his Blessed Master permitted his Enemies at this time to arraign him at a publick Bar: And therefore, in compliance with the Divine Will, thinks it not sufficient barely to make his Defence, but endeavours at the same time to convert his Judges. And this He did with such Demonstration of the Spirit, and of Power, that *Festus*, unwilling to be convinced by the strongest Evidence, cries out with a loud Voice, "*Paul, much Learning doth make thee mad.*"

mad. To which the brave Apostle (like a true Follower of the Holy J E S U S) meekly replies, *I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the Words of Truth and Soberness.* But in all Probability seeing King *Agrippa* more affected with his Discourse, and observing in him an Inclination to know the Truth, he applies himself more particularly to Him: *The King, says he, knoweth of these Things; before whom also I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these Things are hidden from him.* And then, that if possible he might compleat his wished-for Conversion, he, with an inimitable Strain of Oratory, addresses himself still more closely, — *King Agrippa, Believest thou the Prophets? I know that thou believest them.* At which the Passions of the King began to work so strongly, that he was obliged in open Court, to own himself affected by the Prisoner's preaching, and ingenuously to cry out, *Paul, almost thou persuadest Me to be a Christian.*

WHICH Words, taken with the Context, afford us a lively Representation of the different Reception the Doctrine of CHRIST'S

Ministers, who come in the Power and Spirit of Saint *Paul*, meets with now-a-days in the Minds of Men. For notwithstanding They, like this Great Apostle, *speake forth the Words of Truth and Soberness*; and with such Energy and Power, that *all their Adversaries cannot gainsay or resist*: yet too many, with the most Noble *Festus* before mentioned, being, like him, either too proud to be taught, or too sensual, too careless, or too worldly-minded to live up to their Doctrine, — in order to excuse themselves cry out, that *much Learning*, much Study, or, what is more unaccountable much Piety, *hath made them Mad*. And though, blessed be G O D ! all do not thus disbelieve our Report; yet amongst those many others, who gladly receive the Word, and confess that we speak the Words of Truth and Soberness, there are so Few, who arrive at any higher Degree of Piety than that of *Agrippa*, or are any farther persuaded than to be *Almost Christians*, — that I cannot but think it highly necessary to warn my dear Hearers of the Danger of such a State. And therefore from the Words of the Text shall endeavour to consider these three Things:

First,

First, WHAT is meant by an *Almost Christian*. I.

Secondly, WHAT are the chief Reasons why so few arrive no higher than to be *Almost Christians*. II.

Thirdly, I shall consider the Ineffectualness, Danger, Absurdity, and Uneasiness that attends those that are but *Almost Christians*. III.

Fourthly, I shall conclude with a general Exhortation, to set all upon striving not only to be *Almost* but *Altogether Christians*. IV.

AND *First*, I am to consider What is meant by an *Almost Christian*. I.

AN *Almost Christian* then, if we consider him in respect to his Duty to GOD, is one that halts between two Opinions, that wavers between CHRIST and the World; that would reconcile GOD and Mammon, that is, Light and Darkness, CHRIST and *Belial*. It is true, He has an Inclination to Religion, but then he is very cautious how he goes too far in it: His false Heart is always crying out
Spare

Spare thyself, Do thyself no Harm. He prays indeed, that *GOD's Will may be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven:* but then, notwithstanding He is very partial in his Obedience, and fondly hopes that *GOD* will not be extreme to mark every thing that He wilfully does amiss; though an inspired Apostle has told him, that He that wilfully offends in one Point is guilty of all. Above all He is one that depends much on outward Ordinances, and upon that account looks upon himself as *Righteous, and despises Others,* though at the same time he may be as great a Stranger to the Divine Life as any other Person whatsoever. In short, He is fond of the *Form,* but never experiences the *Power of Godliness* in his Heart: He goes on Year after Year, feeding and attending on the Means of Grace; but then, like *Pharaoh's Lean Kine,* is never the better, but rather the worse for them.

If you consider Him in respect to his Neighbour, He is one that is strictly just to all; but then this does not proceed from any Love to *GOD* or Regard to Man, but only out of a Principle of Self-Love; because he
knows

knows Dishonesty will spoil his Reputation, and consequently hinder his Thriving in the World.

HE is one that depends much on being Negatively Good, and contents himself with the Consciousness of having done no one any Harm; though he reads in the Gospel, that *the Unprofitable Servant was cast into outer Darkness*, and the Barren Fig-tree cursed and *dried up from the Roots*, not for bearing *bad*, but *no Fruit*.

HE is no Enemy to Charitable Contributions, if not too frequently recommended: But then he is quite unacquainted with the kind Offices of *Visiting the Sick and Imprisoned, Cloathing the Naked, and relieving the Hungry*. He thinks that these Things belong only to the Clergy, though his own false Heart tells him, that nothing but Pride keeps him from exercising these Acts of Humility, and that JESUS CHRIST, in the 25th Chapter of Saint *Matthew*, condemns Persons to everlasting Punishment, not for being Fornicators, Drunkards, or Extortioners, but merely for neglecting

neglecting these Charitable Offices. *When the Son of Man, says our Blessed Lord himself, shall come in his Glory, He shall set the Sheep on his Right Hand, and the Goats on his Left. And then shall He say unto them on his Left Hand, Depart from me, ye Cursed, into everlasting Fire prepared for the Devil and his Angels: For I was an hungred, and Ye gave me no Meat; I was thirsty, and Ye gave me no Drink; I was a Stranger, and Ye took me not in; Naked, and Ye cloathed me not; Sick and in Prison, and Ye visited me not. Then shall They also say, Lord, When saw we Thee an hungred, or athirst, or a Stranger, or naked, or sick, or in Prison, and did not minister unto Thee? Then shall He answer them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as Ye have not done it unto one of the least of these my Brethren, ye did it not unto me: And these shall go away into Everlasting Punishment. I thought proper to give You this whole Passage of Scripture at large, because our Saviour lays such a particular Stress upon it; and yet notwithstanding it is so little regarded, that, were we to judge by the Practice of Christians, one*

should

should be tempted to think there were no such Verses in the BIBLE.

BUT, to proceed in our Character of an *Almost Christian*: If we consider him in respect to Himself; as before we said he was strictly honest to his Neighbour, so he is likewise strictly sober in himself: But then both his Honesty and Sobriety proceed from the same Principle of a false Self-love. It is true, He runs not into the same Excess of Riot with other Men; but then it is not out of Obedience to the Laws of GOD, but either because his Constitution will not away with Intemperance; or rather because he is cautious of forfeiting his Reputation, or unfitting himself for temporal Business. But though he is so prudent as to avoid Intemperance and Excess, for the Reasons before mentioned; yet he always goes to the Extremity of what is lawful. It is true, He is no Drunkard; but then he has no Christian Self-denial to plead for him. He cannot think our Saviour to be so austere a Master, as to deny us to indulge ourselves in some Particulars: And so by this Means he is kept out of a Sense of true Religion,

gion, as much as if he lived in Debauchery, or any other Crime whatever. As to settling his Principles as well as Practice, He is guided more by the World than by the Word of GOD. As for his part, he cannot think the Way to Heaven so narrow as some would make it: and therefore considers not so much what Scripture requires, as what such and such a good Man does, or what will best suit his own corrupt Inclinations. Upon this account, he is not only very Cautious himself, but likewise very Careful of young Converts, whose Faces are set Heavenward; and therefore is always acting the Devil's Part, and bidding them *spare themselves*, though they are doing no more than what the Scripture strictly requires of them to do: The Consequence of which is, that He suffers not Himself to *enter into the Kingdom of GOD*, and *They that are entering in he binders*.

THUS lives the *Almost Christian*: Not that I can say, I have fully described him to you; but from these Out-lines and Sketches of his Character, if your Consciences have done their proper Offices, and made a particular
Appli-

Application of what has been said to your own Hearts, I cannot but fear that some of you may observe some Features in his Picture, odious as it is, too near resembling your own; and therefore cannot but hope, at the same time, that you join with the Apostle in the Words immediately following the Text, and wish yourselves *not only Almost, but Altogether Christians.*

BUT it is time for me to proceed to the *Second General Thing* proposed; namely, to consider the Reasons why so many are no more than *Almost Christians.*

AND the first Reason I shall mention is, because so many set out with false Notions of Religion; and though they live in a Christian Country, yet know not what Christianity is. This perhaps may be esteemed a hard Saying, but Experience sadly evinces the Truth of it: For some place Religion in being of this or that Communion; more in Morality; most in a round of Duties and a Model of Performances: and few, very few acknowledge it to be, what it really is, a thorough, inward

Change of Nature, a Divine Life, a Vital Participation of JESUS CHRIST, an Union of the Soul with GOD; which the Apostle expresses by saying, *He that is joined to the Lord, is One Spirit.* Hence it happens that so many, even of the most knowing Professors, when you come to converse with them concerning the Essence, the Life, the Soul of Religion, I mean our *New Birth* in JESUS CHRIST, confess themselves quite ignorant of the Matter, and cry out with *Nicodemus*, *How can this Thing be!* And no wonder then, that so many are only *Almost Christians*; when so many know not what *Christianity* is: No marvel so many take up with the *Form*, when they are quite Strangers to the *Power of Godliness*; or content themselves with the *Shadow*, when they know so little about the *Substance* of it. And this is one Cause why so many are *Almost*, why so few are *Altogether Christians*.

A SECOND Reason that may be assigned why so many are no more than *Almost Christians*, is a servile Fear of Man: Multitudes there are, and have been, who though awakened

wakened to a Sense of the Divine Life, and have tasted and felt the Powers of the World to come; yet, out of a base sinful Fear of being counted singular, or contemned by Men, have suffered all those good Impressions to wear off again. It is true they have some Esteem for JESUS CHRIST; but then, like *Nicodemus*, they would come to him only by Night: They are willing to serve him; but then they would do it *secretly for fear of the Jews*: They have a mind to see JESUS; but then they cannot come to him because of the Press, for fear of being laughed at, and ridiculed by those with whom they used to sit at Meat. But well did our Saviour prophesy of such Persons, *How can ye love me which receive Honour one of another?* Alas! have they never read, that *the Friendship of this World is Enmity with GOD*; and that our Lord himself has threatened, *Whosoever shall be ashamed of me or of my Words, in this wicked and adulterous Generation, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when He cometh in the Glory of his Father and of his Holy Angels?* But no wonder that so many are no more than *Almost Christians*, since so many

love

love the Praise of Men more than the Honour which cometh of GOD.

A THIRD Reason why so many are no more than *Almost Christians*, is a reigning Love of Money. This was the pitiable Case of that forward young Man in the Gospel, who came running to our Blessed Lord, and kneeling before him, enquired what *He must do to inherit Eternal Life*; to which our Blessed Master replied, *Thou knowest the Commandments, Do not kill, Do not commit Adultery, Do not Steal*: To which the Young Man replied (Oh that every Young Man here present could do so too!) *All these have I kept from my Youth*. But when our Lord proceeded to tell him, *Yet lackest thou One Thing, Go sell all that thou hast and give to the Poor, — he was grieved at that Saying, and went away sorrowful, for he had great Possessions!* Poor Youth! He had a good Mind to be a *Christian*, and to inherit Eternal Life, but thought it too dear, if it could be purchased at no less an Expence than of his whole Estate! And thus many, both Young and Old, now-a-days come running to worship our Blessed Lord

Lord in publick, and kneel before him in private, and enquire at his Gospel, What they must do to inherit Eternal Life: But when they find they must renounce the Self-Enjoyment of Riches, and *forsake All* in Affection to follow Him, They cry, *The LORD pardon us in this Thing! — We pray Thee, have us excused.* —

BUT is Heaven so small a Trifle in such Men's Esteem, as not to be worth a little gilded Earth? Is Eternal Life so mean a Purchase, as not to deserve the temporary Renunciation of a few transitory Riches? Surely it is. But however inconsistent such a Behaviour may be, this inordinate Love of Money is too evidently the common and fatal Cause why so many are no more than *Almost Christians*.

NOR is the reigning Love of Pleasure a less uncommon, or a less fatal Cause why so many are no more than *Almost Christians*. Thousands and Thousands there are, who despise Riches, and would willingly be True Disciples of JESUS CHRIST, would parting
with

with their Money make them so; But when they are told that our Blessed Lord has laid it down as an indispensable Condition, that *Whosoever will come after Him must deny himself*; — like the pitiable Young Man before mentioned, they *go away sorrowful*: For they have too great a Love for sensual Pleasures: They will, like *Herod*, perhaps send for the Ministers of CHRIST, as He did for *John*, and hear them gladly: But touch them in their *Herodias*, tell them they must part with such or such a darling Pleasure; and with Wicked *Abab* they cry out, *Hast thou found us, O our Enemy?* —

TELL them of the Necessity of Mortification, Fasting, and Self-Denial, and it is as difficult to them to hear, as if you was to bid them *cut off a Right Hand or pluck out a Right Eye*: They cannot think our Blessed Lord requires so much at their Hands, though an inspired Apostle has commanded us to *mortify our Members which are upon the Earth*: And He himself, even after he had converted Millions, and was very near arrived to the End of his Race, yet professed that it was his daily Practice

Practice to keep under his Body, and bring it into Subjection, lest after he had preached to Others, He himself should be a Cast-away!

BUT some Men would be wiser than this Great Apostle, and chalk out to us what they falsely imagine an easier Way to Happiness. They would flatter us we may go to Heaven without offering Violence to our sensual Appetites; and *enter into the Strait Gate* without *striving* against our carnal Inclinations. And this is another Reason why so many are only *Almost*, and not *Altogether Christians*.

THE Fifth and last Reason I shall assign why so many are only *Almost Christians*, is a Fickleness and Instability of Temper.

IT has been, no doubt, the Misfortune that many a Minister and sincere *Christian* has met with, to weep and wail over Numbers of promising Converts, who seemingly began in the Spirit, but after a while have fell away, and basely ended in the Flesh; and this not for want of right Notions in Religion, nor out of a servile Fear of Man, nor out of a Love

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of Money or sensual Pleasure, but out of an Instability and Fickleness of Temper.

THEY looked upon Religion merely for Novelty; as something which pleased them for a while, but after their Curiosity was satisfied, they have laid it aside again: Like the Young Man that came to see JESUS with a Linnen Cloth about his naked Body, they have followed him for a Season, but when Temptations have come to take hold on them, for want of a little more Resolution, they have been stripped of all their good Intentions, and *fled away naked*. They at first, *like a Tree planted by the Water side*, grew up and flourished for a while; *but having no Root in themselves*, no inward Principle of Holiness and Piety, like *Jonah's Gourd*, were soon *dried up, cut down, and withered*. Their good Intentions are but too like the violent Motions of the Animal Spirits of a Body newly beheaded, which though impetuous, are not lasting. In short, they set out well in their Journey to Heaven, but finding the Way either narrower or longer than they expected, — through an Unsteadiness of Temper, They have

have made an Eternal Halt, and so *returned like the Dog to his Vomit, or like the Sow that was washed to her wallowing in the Mire!*

BUT I tremble to pronounce the Fate of such unstable Professors, *who having put their Hands to the Plow, for want of a little more Resolution, shamefully look back.* How shall I repeat to them that dreadful Threatning, *If any Man draw back, my Soul shall have no Pleasure in him!* And again, *It is impossible, that is, exceeding difficult at least, for those that have been once enlightened, and have tasted the Good Gift of GOD's Holy Spirit, and the Powers of the World to come, if They should fall away, to be renewed again unto Repentance.* But notwithstanding the Gospel is so severe against Apostates, yet many that begun well, through a Fickleness of Temper, (Oh that none of us here present may ever be such) have been by this means of *the Number of those that turn back unto Perdition.* And this is the Fifth and last Reason I shall give why so many are only *Almost*, and not *Altogether Christians.*

BUT you, Brethren, have not *so* learned CHRIST. GOD forbid that a Fear of a little Contempt, a Love of a little worldly Gain, or a Fondness for a little sensual Pleasure, or Want of a steady Resolution, should hinder you from entering into Eternal Life, or make you so sottish as to think you may compound Matters between GOD and your Souls.

III. PROCEED we therefore now to the *Third General Thing* proposed, namely, To consider the Folly of being no more than an *Almost Christian*.

AND the first Proof I shall give of the Folly of such a Proceeding is, — that it is ineffectual to Salvation. It is true, such Men are Almost Good, but *almost* to hit the Mark is *really* to miss it. GOD requires us to *love him with all our Hearts, with all our Souls, and with all our Strength*: He loves us too well to admit any Rival; because so far as our Hearts are empty of GOD, so far must they be unhappy. The Devil indeed, like the false Mother that came before *Solomon*, would
have

have our Hearts divided, as she would have had the Child; but G O D, like the true Mother, will have all or none. *My Son, give me thy Heart*, thy whole Heart, is the general Call to all: And if we do not perform this Condition, we never can expect the Divine Mercy.

P E R S O N S may indeed flatter themselves, that a partial Obedience will serve their Turn; but G O D at the Great Day will strike them dead, as he did *Ananias* and *Sapphira* by the Mouth of his Servant *Peter*, for pretending to offer him all their Hearts, when they *keep back* from him the greatest *Part*. They may perhaps impose upon their fellow Creatures for a while, but He that enabled *Abijah* to cry out, *Come in, thou Wife of Jeroboam*, when she came disguised to enquire about her sick Son, will also discover Them through their most artful Diffimulations, and if *their Hearts are not whole with him*, — appoint them their Portion with *Hypocrites* and *Unbelievers*.

B U T Secondly, What renders an half-way Piety more inexcusable is, that it is not only
insuf-

insufficient to our own Salvation, but also most prejudicial to that of Others.

AN *Almost Christian* is one of the most hurtful Creatures in the World; He is a *Wolf in Sheep's Cloathing*; He is one of those False Prophets our Blessed Lord bids us beware of, in his Sermon on the Mount, who would persuade Men, that the Way to Heaven is broader than it really is; and thereby, as it was observed before, *enter not into the Kingdom of GOD themselves, and those that are entering in they hinder*. These, these are the Men that turn the World into a lukewarm *Laodicean Spirit*; that hang out false Lights, and so shipwreck unthinking benighted Souls in their Voyage to the Haven where they would be. These are they that are greater Enemies to the Cross of CHRIST, than Infidels themselves: For of an Unbeliever every one will be aware; but an *Almost Christian*, through his subtle Hypocrisy, *draws away many after him*; and therefore must expect to *receive the greater Damnation*.

BUT Thirdly, As it is most prejudicial to ourselves and hurtful to others, so it is the greatest

greatest Piece of Ingratitude we can express towards our Lord and Master JESUS CHRIST. For did He come down from Heaven, and shed his precious Blood, to purchase these Hearts of ours, and shall we only give him half of them? Oh how can we say we love Him, when our Hearts are not wholly with Him? How can we call Him our Saviour, when we will not endeavour sincerely to approve ourselves to Him, and so let Him see the Travail of his Soul, and be satisfied!

HAD any of us purchased a Slave at a most expensive Rate, that was before involved in the utmost Miseries and Torments, and so must have continued for ever, — had we shut up our Bowels of Compassion from him; and was this Slave afterwards to grow rebellious, or deny giving us but half his Service: How, how should we exclaim against his base Ingratitude! And yet this base ungrateful Slave thou art, O Man, who acknowledgest thyself to be redeemed from infinite unavoidable Misery and Punishment, by the Death of JESUS CHRIST, and yet wilt not give thyself wholly to Him. But shall we

we deal with GOD our Maker in a manner we would not be dealt with by a Man like ourselves? Shall we mete out a less Measure of Love to our Saviour, than we would have dealt to ourselves? GOD forbid!

- IV. No, (that I may come to the *last Thing* proposed, namely, to add a Word or two of Exhortation to be not only *Almost*, but *Altogether Christians*) Let us scorn all such base and treacherous Treatment of our King and Saviour, nay our GOD. Let us not take some Pains all our Lives to go to Heaven, and yet plunge ourselves into Hell at last. Let us give GOD our whole Hearts, and no longer *halt between two Opinions*: *If the World be GOD, let us serve That*; *If Pleasure be a GOD, let us serve that*; but *if the LORD He be GOD, let us, Oh let us serve Him alone*. Alas! Why, why should we stand out any longer? Why should we be so in Love with Slavery, as not wholly to renounce the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, which, like so many spiritual Chains, bind down our Souls, and hinder them from flying up to GOD. Alas! What are we afraid of? Is not GOD able to

to reward our entire Obedience? If He is, as the *Almost Christian's* lame Way of serving Him seems to grant, — Why then will we not serve Him entirely? For the same Reason we do so much, why do we not do more? Or do you think that being only half Religious will make you happy, but that going farther will render you miserable and uneasy? Alas! this, my Brethren, is Delusion all over! For what is it but this *half Piety*, this wavering between GOD and the World, that makes so many that are seemingly well disposed, such utter Strangers to the Comforts of Religion? They chuse just so much of Religion as will disturb them in their Lusts, and follow their Lusts so far as to deprive themselves of the Comforts of Religion. Whereas, on the contrary, would they sincerely *leave all* in Affection, and *give their Hearts* wholly to God, They would then (and they cannot 'till then) experience the unspeakable Pleasure of having a Mind at Unity with itself, and enjoy such a Peace of GOD, which even in this Life passes all Understanding, and which they were entire Strangers to before. It is true, if we will devote ourselves entirely to GOD, we

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must

must meet with Contempt ; but then it is because Contempt is necessary to heal our Pride. We must renounce some sensual Pleasure ; but then it is because those unfit us for Spiritual ones, which are infinitely better. We must renounce the Love of the World ; but then it is that we may be filled with the Love of GOD : And when that has once enlarged our Hearts, we shall, like *Jacob* when he served for his beloved *Rachel*, think nothing too difficult to undergo, no Hardships too tedious to endure, because of the Love we shall then have for our dear Redeemer. Thus easy, thus delightful will be the Ways of GOD even in this Life : but when once we throw off these Bodies, and our Souls are *filled with all the Fullness of GOD*, Oh ! What Heart can conceive, What Tongue can express, with what unspeakable Joy and Consolation we shall then look back on our past sincere and hearty Services, which have procured us so invaluable a Reward ! Think you then, my dear Hearers, we shall repent we had done too much ; or rather think you not we shall be ashamed that we did no more ; and blush we were so backward to give up All to GOD, when He intended

intended hereafter to give us Himself? —

Let me therefore, to conclude, exhort you, my Brethen, to have always the Unspeakable Reward of an entire Obedience set before you: and think withal, that every Degree of Holiness you neglect, every Instance of Piety you pass by, is a Jewel taken out of your Crown, a Degree of Blessedness lost in the Vision of God. Oh! do but always think and act thus, and you will no longer be labouring to compound Matters between God and the World; but on the contrary, be daily endeavouring to give up yourselves more and more unto Him; you will be always Watching, always Praying, always Aspiring after farther Degrees of Purity, and Love, and so consequently always preparing yourselves for a fuller Light and Enjoyment of that God, in whose Presence there is Fullness of Joy, and at whose Right Hand there are Pleasures for evermore!

Amen! Amen!

F I N I S.

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